Odoacer

(4 September 476 – 15 March 493)

BRIEFING

Odoacer[a] (c. 433 – 15 March 493 AD), also spelled **Odovacer** or **Odovacar**,[b] was a barbarian soldier and statesman from the Middle Danube who deposed the Western Roman child emperor Romulus Augustulus and became the ruler of Italy (476–493). Odoacer's overthrow of Romulus Augustulus is traditionally understood as marking the end of the Western Roman Empire.

Although he held power over Italy, he also represented himself as the client of the Eastern Roman Emperor in Constantinople, Zeno. He was referred to not only as a king (Latin: *rex*), but also as commander (*dux*), or using the Roman honorific patrician, granted by Zeno. Odoacer himself used the title of king in the only surviving official document that emanated from his chancery, and it was also used by the consul Basilius. He had the support of the Roman Senate and was able to distribute land to his followers without much opposition. Unrest among his soldiers led to violence in 477–478, but no such disturbances occurred during the later period of his reign. Although Odoacer was an Arian Christian, he rarely intervened in the affairs of the Trinitarian state church of the Roman Empire.

Before becoming king, Odoacer was a military leader in Italy who led the revolt of Herulian, Rugian, and Scirian soldiers that deposed Romulus Augustulus on 4 September AD 476. Eleven-year-old Augustulus had been declared Western Roman Emperor by his father Orestes, the rebellious general of the army in Italy, less than a year before, but had been unable to gain allegiance or recognition beyond central Italy. With the backing of the Roman Senate, Odoacer thenceforth ruled Italy autonomously, paying lip service to the authority of Julius Nepos, the previous Western emperor, and Zeno. Upon Nepos's murder in 480, Odoacer invaded Dalmatia, to punish the murderers. He executed the conspirators, conquered the region and incorporated it into his domain within two years.

When Illus, master of soldiers of the Eastern Empire, asked for Odoacer's help in 484 in his struggle to depose Zeno, Odoacer invaded Zeno's westernmost provinces. The emperor responded first by inciting the Rugii of present-day Austria to attack Italy. During the winter of 487–488, Odoacer crossed the Danube and defeated the Rugii in their own territory. Zeno eventually appointed the Ostrogoth Theodoric the Great, who had been menacing the Eastern Empire within the Balkans. Theodoric invaded Italy in 489 and by August 490 had captured almost the entire peninsula, forcing Odoacer to take refuge in Ravenna. The city surrendered on 5 March 493. Theodoric invited Odoacer to a banquet of reconciliation, where instead of forging an alliance, Theodoric killed Odoacer, and replaced him as king.

ORIGINS

Name etymology

The origin of the name Odoacer, which may give indications as to his tribal affiliation, is debated. It is however traditionally derived from the Germanic components **auda* (luck, possession, wealth) and **wakra* (awake, vigilant, lively). It is not clear from which branch of the Germanic language family it is derived. In favour of this etymology, this form has a cognate in another Germanic language, the titular *Eadwacer* of the Old English poem *Wulf and Eadwacer* (where Old English renders the earlier Germanic sound *au-* as *ea-*).

However, historians Robert L. Reynolds and Robert S. Lopez explored the possibility that the name Odoacer was not Germanic, making several arguments that his ethnic background might lie elsewhere. One of these is that his name, "Odoacer", for which they claimed an etymology in Germanic languages had not been convincingly found, arguing instead that it could be a form of the Turkic "Ot-toghar" ("grass-born" or "fire-born"), or the shorter form "Ot-ghar" ("herder"). There is also debate regarding the etymology of Edeco, the apparent name of Odoacer's father. Omeljan Pritsak considered it Turkic; others such as Peter Heather continue to consider it Germanic.

The name of Odoacer's apparent brother, Hunulf or Onulf, is generally accepted to be Germanic "Hun wolf". Reynolds and Lopez emphasized that the first part, "hun", although the meaning is uncertain, may refer to the Huns. Odoacer's son is given two different names in ancient sources, Thelan and Oklan. Reynolds and Lopez compare these to Turkic names: "Thelan resembles the name borne by the khagan of the eastern Turks, Tulan, who reigned from 587 to 600 A.D. Oklan resembles closely the Turkish-Tatar word oghlan, 'youth' ".

The assumption that the etymology of Odoacer's name can be used to determine his ancestry or language has been criticized by historians and philologists such as Otto J. Maenchen-Helfen and Walter Pohl, who have pointed out that Germanic-speakers used Hunnic names in this period and region, and vice versa. As emphasized by Pohl, the same person could be considered Hunnic or Germanic under different circumstances, especially during the upheavals after Attila's death, and "the ruling class of Attila's empire continued to influence tribal politics even after its collapse".

Father and brother

In a fragment from a history of Priscus, reproduced in the 7th century by John of Antioch, Odoacer is described as a man of the Sciri, the son of Edeco ("Idiko"), and brother of Hunulf who killed Armatus in the eastern Roman empire. The *Anonymus Valesianus* agrees that his father's name was Edeko ("Aediko"), and refers to him leading Sciri and Heruli.

Another record of an Edica—apparently the same person—is found in Jordanes, who identified him as a leader of the Sciri along with a person named Hunuulf (presumably his son), after the fall of Attila. They were defeated by the Ostrogoths at the Battle of Bolia in Pannonia about 469.

An earlier Edeco ("Edekon") was described by Priscus as a trusted man of Attila, and ambassador to Constantinople. He escorted Priscus and other Imperial dignitaries back to Attila's camp. It is not universally accepted that this Edeco is the father of Odoacer. Priscus once calls him a Scythian, and another time a Hun. It has been argued classifications like "Scythian" or "Hun" from this period could refer to social type and lifestyle rather than an exact ethnic origin.[9] Macbain, however, argues that Priscus was careful with such terms, and sees this as evidence that Edeco cannot be the Scirian father of Odoacer.

Ethnic affiliations

Except for the fact that he was not considered Roman, Odoacer's precise ethnic origins are not known. His origins probably lie in the multi-ethnic empire of Attila, a generation earlier, which included several groups referred to in this period as "Gothic peoples"—the same polyethnic complex which dominated the military forces that he is most famous for leading throughout his later life. On that basis, he is likely at least partly of Germanic descent. Early medieval sources such as Theophanes called him a Goth. Likewise, the 6th century chronicler Marcellinus Comes called him a "king of the Goths" (*Odoacer rex Gothorum*).

One of the most important sources for this topic has been the 6th-century writer Jordanes, who associated him with several of the Gothic peoples who came to the Middle Danube during the time of Attila's empire, including the Sciri, Heruli, and Rugii. In several passages, Jordanes also associated Odoacer with the otherwise unknown Turcilingi—who may have been a people or perhaps a dynasty. The Turcilingi are not mentioned in any other historical sources apart from those derived from Jordanes and their ethnic affiliations are unclear, but they may have been Gothic, Hunnic, or even precursors of the Thuringii. While in one passage of *Getica*, Jordanes describes Odoacer as king of the Turcilingi (*Torcilingorum rex*) with Scirian and Heruli followers, in another passage Jordanes mentions Italy being "shaken by the tyranny of the Torcilingi and Rugi" during Odoacer's reign. In his *Romana*, the same author defines Odoacer as a descendant of the Rugii, or of a person named Rogus (*Odoacer genere Rogus*), with Turcilingi, Scirian and Heruli followers.

The Scirii and Heruls were among those known to contemporaries such as the historian Procopius as "Gothic peoples". They both appear to have come to the Danubian area from the direction of what is now Ukraine, as do the Goths, Huns, and Alans. The Rugii, who apparently originated on the south Baltic coast, are known from other sources for their post-Attila kingdom on the Danube. These groups fought on the same side as the Scirii in the battle of Bolia in 468, defeating the Ostrogoths, who were one of the most dominant of the post-Attila groups. It has also been pointed out by Reynolds and Lopez that Attila had an uncle named Rogus and that Jordanes may have been saying Odoacer was his descendant. After the battle of Bolia, the Scirii, Rugii and Heruli made up a large part of the military force Odoacer came to control in Italy, while the Ostrogoths moved into Eastern Roman territory in the Balkans. The near contemporary *Auctorium Havniense* also calls Odoacer a king of Heruli. Many historians, such as medieval scholar Michael Frassetto, accept that Odoacer was of Scirian heritage, because of the apparent family links to Edeko and Hunulf.

On the other hand, scholars are divided about whether Jordanes can be relied upon concerning the "Turcilingi". It has also been proposed that these are an otherwise unknown Turkic speaking people among the Huns. Whether or not this is accepted, there is also an argument that the Turcilingi mentioned by Jordanes were early Thuringians, who established a kingdom by about this time in what is now central Germany, relatively far to the north of the Danubian kingdoms. In favour of this argument, the 10th century *Suda* identifies Odoacer's apparent brother Hunulf as a Thuringian on his father's side and Scirian on his mother's side. This fragment was most likely written by the contemporary historian Malchus, who was a near contemporary and likely to be well-informed.

Much later, a memorial plate from 1521 found in the catacombe Chapel of St Maximus in Petersfriedhof—the burial site of St Peter's Abbey in Salzburg (Austria)—mentions Odoacer as King of "Rhutenes" or "Rhutenians" (Latin: *Rex Rhvtenorvm*), who invaded Noricum in 477. Due to its very late date of 1521 and several anachronistic elements, the content of that plate is considered nothing more than a legend. In spite of that, the plate has become a popular "source" for several theorists that try to connect Odoacer with ancient Celtic Ruthenes, and also with later Slavic Ruthenians. Historian Paul R. Magocsi argues such theories should be regarded as "inventive tales" of "creative" writers and nothing more.

Finally, a passage from Eugippius's *Life of Saint Severinus* indicated that Odoacer was so tall that he had to bend down to pass through the doorway, which historian Bruce Macbain considers another strong argument that he was unlikely to have been a Hun, as ancient sources describe the Huns as shorter than Romans.

Historians such as Penny MacGeorge and Macbain avow that Odoacer was likely half-Scirian and half-Thuringian.[26] Macbain's sees this as evidence of Odoacer's Germanic heritage arguing that "whatever the Skirians may have been [...] no one doubts that the Thuringians were Germans", and that while the "ancient sources exhibit considerable confusion over Odovacer's tribal affiliation" none of them calls Odoacer a Hun. Historian Patrick Amory explains that "Odoacer is called a Scirian, a Rugian, a Goth or a Thuringian in sources; his father is called a Hun, his mother a Scirian. Odoacer's father Edeco was associated first with the Huns under Attila, and then with a group called Sciri, an ethnographic name that appears intermittently in fifth-century sources."[28] This line of reasoning is also picked up on by historian Erik Jensen, who avows that Odoacer was born to a Gothic mother and that his father Edeco was a Hun.

BEFORE ITALY

There are two recorded incidents involving military leaders with the name Odoacer preserved in the *History of the Franks* of Gregory of Tours, using two different spellings and involving two different regions. These involve events which were early enough to be Odoacer before his appearance in Italy. Both were during the lifetime of Childeric I, king of the Franks, who died about 481.

In the first mention, a confused or confusing report is given of a number of battles in about 463 fought by Childeric, Aegidius, Count Paul, and one "Adovacrius" (with an "a") who was leading a group of Saxons based at the mouth of the Loire. Though there is no consensus, some historians, such as Reynolds and Lopez, have suggested that this Adovacrius may be the same person as the future king of Italy. Matthias Springer has noted that Odoacer's involvement with northern European Saxons in this period would be consistent with the proposal that he had Thuringian ancestry, pointing out that the term Saxon in this period was probably not a distinct ethnic label.

In a second mention by Gregory of Tours, an Odovacrius (with an "o") made an alliance with the same Childeric, and together they fought the Alamanni, who had been causing problems in Italy. This Odoacer, with his connection to the region north of Italy, and his "o" spelling, is probably the future king of Italy, before he was king.

Another early recorded event which is more certainly about Odoacer the future king, was shortly before he arrived in Italy. Eugippius, in his *Life of Saint Severinus*, records how a group of barbarians on their way to Italy stopped to pay their respects to the holy man. Odoacer, at the time "a young man, of tall figure, clad in poor clothes", learned from Severinus that he would one day become famous. Despite the fact that Odoacer was an Arian Christian and Severinus was Catholic, the latter left a deep impression on him. When Odoacer took his leave, Severinus made one final comment which proved prophetic: "Go to Italy, go, now covered with mean hides; soon you will make rich gifts to many."

LEADER OF THE FOEDERATI

By 470, Odoacer had become an officer in what remained of the Roman Army. Although Jordanes writes of Odoacer as invading Italy "as leader of the Sciri, the Heruli and allies of various races", modern writers describe him as being part of the Roman military establishment, based on John of Antioch's statement that Odoacer was on the side of Ricimer at the beginning of his battle with the emperor Anthemius in 472. Odoacer is said to have "hastened the emperor's downfall", since he switched sides to join with Ricimer. Procopius describes him as one of the Emperor's bodyguards, only agreeing to this position if placed in charge of them.

When Orestes was in 475 appointed *Magister militum* and patrician by the Western Roman Emperor Julius Nepos, Odoacer became head of the barbarian *foederati* military forces of Italy. Under the command of Orestes were significant contingents of Germanic peoples made up mostly of Rugii and Heruli tribesmen. Before the end of that year Orestes had rebelled and driven Nepos from Italy. Orestes then proclaimed his young son Romulus the new emperor as Romulus Augustus, called "Augustulus" (31 October). At this time, Odoacer was a soldier rising through the ranks. However, Nepos reorganized his court in Salona in Dalmatia, and received homage and affirmation from the remaining fragments of the Western Empire beyond Italy and, most importantly, from Constantinople, which refused to accept Augustulus, Zeno having branded him and his father as traitors and usurpers.

About this time, the *foederati*, who had been quartered in Italy all of these years, had grown weary of this arrangement. In the words of J. B. Bury, "They desired to have roof-trees and lands of their own, and they petitioned Orestes to reward them for their services, by granting them lands and settling them permanently in Italy". Orestes refused their petition, and they turned to Odoacer to lead their revolt against Orestes. Orestes was killed at Placentia along with his brother Paulus outside Ravenna. The Germanic *foederati,* the Scirians and the Heruli, as well as a large segment of the Italic Roman army, then proclaimed Odoacer *rex* ("king") on 23 August 476. Odoacer then advanced to Ravenna and captured the city, compelling the young emperor Romulus to abdicate on 4 September. According to the *Anonymus Valesianus*, Odoacer was moved by Romulus's youth and his beauty to not only spare his life but give him a pension of 6,000 *solidi* and sent him to Campania to live with his relatives.

Following Romulus Augustus's deposition, according to the historian Malchus, upon hearing of the accession of Zeno to the throne, the Senate in Rome sent an embassy to the Eastern Emperor and bestowed upon him the Western imperial insignia. The message was clear: the West no longer required a separate Emperor, for "one monarch sufficed [to rule] the world". In response, Zeno accepted their gifts and this essentially brought to an end any puppet emperors in the West, with Nepos banished and Anthemius dead. The Eastern Emperor then conferred upon Odoacer the title of Patrician and granted him legal authority to govern Italy in the name of Rome, as *dux Italiae*. Zeno also suggested that Odoacer should receive Nepos back as Emperor in the West, "if he truly wished to act with justice." Although he accepted the title of Patrician and *Dux* from Zeno, Odoacer did not invite Julius Nepos to return to Rome, and the latter remained in Dalmatia until his death. Odoacer was careful to observe form, however, and made a pretence of acting on Nepos's authority, even issuing coins with both his image and that of Zeno. Following Nepos's murder in 480, who was killed while waiting in Dalmatia, Zeno became sole Emperor.

Bury, however, disagrees that Odoacer's assumption of power marked the fall of the Western Roman Empire:

> It stands out prominently as an important stage in the process of the dismemberment of the Empire. It belongs to the same catalogue of chronological dates which includes A.D. 418, when Honorius settled the Goths in Aquitaine, and A.D. 435, when Valentinian ceded African lands to the Vandals. In A.D. 476 the same principle of disintegration was first applied to Italy. The settlement of Odovacar's East Germans, with Zeno's acquiescence, began the process by which Italian soil was to pass into the hands of Ostrogoths and Lombards, Franks and Normans. And Odovacar's title of king emphasised the significance of the change.

KING OF ITALY

In 476, Odoacer was proclaimed rex by his soldiers and *dux Italiae* by emperor Zeno, initiating a new administrative era over Roman lands. Odoacer introduced a few important changes to the administrative system of Italy. According to Jordanes, at the beginning of his reign he "slew Count Bracila at Ravenna that he might inspire a fear of himself among the Romans." He took many military actions to strengthen his control over Italy and its neighbouring areas. He achieved a solid diplomatic coup by inducing the Vandal king Gaiseric to cede Sicily to him. Noting that "Odovacar seized power in August of 476, Gaiseric died in January 477, and the sea usually became closed to navigation around the beginning of November", F. M. Clover dates this cession to September or October 476. When Julius Nepos was murdered by two of his retainers in his country house near Salona (9 May 480), Odoacer assumed the duty of pursuing and executing the assassins, and at the same time established his own rule in Dalmatia.

As Bury points out, "It is highly important to observe that Odovacar established his political power with the co-operation of the Roman Senate, and this body seems to have given him their loyal support throughout his reign, so far as our meagre sources permit us to draw inferences." He regularly nominated members of the Senate to the Consulate and other prestigious offices: "Basilius, Decius, Venantius, and Manlius Boethius held the consulship and were either Prefects of Rome or Praetorian Prefects; Symmachus and Sividius were consuls and Prefects of Rome; another senator of old family, Cassiodorus, was appointed a minister of finance." A. H. M. Jones also notes that under Odoacer the Senate acquired "enhanced prestige and influence" in order to counter any desires for restoration of Imperial rule. As the most tangible example of this renewed prestige, for the first time since the mid-3rd century copper coins were issued with the legend *S(enatus) C(onsulto)*. Jones describes these coins as "fine big copper pieces", which were "a great improvement on the miserable little *nummi* hitherto current", and not only were they copied by the Vandals in Africa, but they formed the basis of the currency reform by Anastasius in the Eastern Empire.

Although Odoacer was an Arian Christian, his relations with the Chalcedonian church hierarchy were remarkably good. As G. M. Cook notes in her introduction to Magnus Felix Ennodius's *Life of Saint Epiphanius*, he showed great esteem for Bishop Epiphanius: in response to the bishop's petition, Odoacer granted the inhabitants of Liguria a five-year immunity from taxes, and again granted his requests for relief from abuses by the praetorian prefect. The biography of Pope Felix III in the *Liber Pontificalis* openly states that the pontiff's tenure occurred during Odoacer's reign without any complaints about the king being registered.

In 487/488, Odoacer led his army to victory against the Rugians in Noricum, taking their king Feletheus into captivity; when word that Feletheus's son, Fredericus, had returned to his people, Odoacer sent his brother Onoulphus with an army back to Noricum against him. Onoulphus found it necessary to evacuate the remaining Romans and resettled them in Italy. The remaining Rugians fled and took refuge with the Ostrogoths; the abandoned province was settled by the Lombards by 493.

FALL AND DEATH

As Odoacer's position improved, Zeno, the Eastern Emperor, increasingly saw him as a rival. Odoacer exchanged messages with Illus, who had been in open revolt against Zeno since 484. Switching allegiances, Zeno subsequently sought to destroy Odoacer and then promised Theodoric the Great and his Ostrogoths the Italian peninsula if they were to defeat and remove Odoacer. As both Herwig Wolfram and Peter Heather point out, Theodoric had his own reasons to agree to this offer: "Theodoric had enough experience to know (or at least suspect) that Zeno would not, in the long term, tolerate his independent power. When Theodoric rebelled in 485, we are told, he had in mind Zeno's treatment of Armatus. Armatus defected from Basilicus to Zeno in 476, and was made senior imperial general for life. Within a year, Zeno had him assassinated."

In 489, Theodoric led the Ostrogoths across the Julian Alps and into Italy. On 28 August, Odoacer met him at the Isonzo, only to be defeated. He withdrew to Verona, reaching its outskirts on 27 September, where he immediately set up a fortified camp. Theodoric followed him and three days later defeated him again. While Odoacer took refuge in Ravenna, Theodoric continued across Italy to Mediolanum, where the majority of Odoacer's army, including his chief general Tufa, surrendered to the Ostrogothic king. Theodoric had no reason to doubt Tufa's loyalty and dispatched his new general to Ravenna with a band of elite soldiers. Herwig Wolfram observes, "but Tufa changed sides, the Gothic elite force entrusted to his command was destroyed, and Theodoric suffered his first serious defeat on Italian soil." Theodoric recoiled by seeking safety in Ticinum. Odoacer emerged from Ravenna and started to besiege his rival. While both were fully engaged, the Burgundians seized the opportunity to plunder and devastated Liguria. Many Romans were taken into captivity and did not regain their freedom until Theodoric ransomed them three years later.

The following summer, the Visigothic king Alaric II demonstrated what Wolfram calls "one of the rare displays of Gothic solidarity" and sent military aid to help his kinsman, forcing Odoacer to raise his siege. Theodoric emerged from Ticinum, and on 11 August 490, the armies of the two kings clashed on the Adda River. Odoacer again was defeated and forced back into Ravenna, where Theodoric besieged him. Ravenna proved to be invulnerable, surrounded by marshes and estuaries and easily supplied by small boats from its hinterlands, as Procopius later pointed out in his *History*. Further, Tufa remained at large in the strategic valley of the Adige near Trent, and received unexpected reinforcements when dissent amongst Theodoric's ranks led to sizable desertions. That same year, the Vandals took their turn to strike while both sides were fully engaged and invaded Sicily. While Theodoric was engaged with them, his ally Fredericus, king of the Rugians, began to oppress the inhabitants of Pavia, whom the latter's forces had been garrisoned to protect. Once Theodoric intervened in person in late August 491, his punitive acts drove Fredericus to desert with his followers to Tufa.

By this time, however, Odoacer appeared to have lost all hope of victory. A large-scale sortie he sent out of Ravenna on the night of 9/10 July 491 ended in failure, during which his commander-in-chief, Livilia, along with the best of his Herulian soldiers, was killed. On 29 August 492, the Goths were about to assemble enough ships at Rimini to set up an effective blockade of Ravenna. Despite these decisive losses, the war dragged on until 25 February 493 when John, bishop of Ravenna, was able to negotiate a treaty between Theodoric and Odoacer to occupy Ravenna together and share joint rule. After a three-year siege, Theodoric entered the city on 5 March. Odoacer died ten days later, slain by Theodoric while they shared a meal. Theodoric had plotted to have a group of his followers kill him while the two kings were feasting together in the imperial palace of Honorius "Ad Laurentum" ("At the Laurel Grove"); when this plan went astray, Theodoric drew his sword and struck him on the collarbone. In response to Odoacer's dying question, "Where is God?" Theodoric cried, "This is what you did to my friends." Theodoric was said to have stood over the body of his dead rival and exclaimed, "The man has no bones in his body."

Not only did Theodoric slay Odoacer, he thereafter had the betrayed king's loyal followers hunted down and killed as well, an event which left him as the master of Italy. Odoacer's wife Sunigilda was stoned to death, and his brother Onoulphus was killed by archers while seeking refuge in a church. Theodoric exiled Odoacer's son Thela to Gaul, but when he attempted to return to Italy Theodoric had him killed. Despite the tragic ending of his domain, followers, and family, Odoacer left an important legacy, in that, he had laid the foundations of a great kingdom in Italy that benefited Theodoric the Great.

Romulus Augustulus surrending to Odoacer